Is Literacy a Right or An Obligation?

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#### Introduction

Does being illiterate mean that you are a product of a family that lives in poverty and therefore not given the opportunity to learn how to read or write? Are there life circumstances that may prevent a person from receiving an education? Will the children of illiterate parents become a product of crime, poverty and the welfare system because of their parent's inability to receive an education?

Can the cycle of illiteracy be stopped? The answers to each question may not be answered directly, but the content of the paper is intended to provoke critical thinking that would provide the reader with some insight into the reasoning behind my opinion.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the social stigmas that are placed on the illiterate that would stimulate thoughts and create dialogue that would enable people to critically think about how being illiterate is viewed in America. This paper is intended to possibly transform or alter the opinions of the mainstream supporters regarding the possible circumstances that contribute to adult illiteracy and if literacy should be deemed as a right or an obligation within a democratic society.

# **Stigmas Placed On The Illiterate**

In the United States, to be illiterate is the inability to read, write and speak in the English language. "In 1991, Congress passed the National Literacy Act, that defined literacy as the ability to write, read and speak English, and compute to solve problems at high levels that enables a individual to function on the job and in society" (Rivera, 2008, p. 8).

This definition of literacy causes labels to be placed on individuals that have not acquired the skills of reading, writing or speaking English. This deficit places individuals in the category of illiteracy. Illiterate people are stigmatized by myths such as failed lives, poor

self-concept, and the equation of poverty with illiteracy. Illiterate people respond to stigma by "passing" and "covering"; the stigma of association affects adult literacy education" (Beder, 1991, p. 76).

The stigmas that society places on individuals without reading and writing skills are sometimes based on individual prejudices and lack of knowledge and understanding of social welfare reform and poverty in the United States. "Welfare Reform Act has failed to alleviate poverty because it blames the individual instead of social structures and perpetuates poverty through generalizations and racism" (Wolfrom, 2010, p. 3).

## Is Literacy a Right?

In my opinion literacy is a civil right. Citizens of a democratic society have a right to receive an education and living in poverty should not eliminate this right. Being in poverty is not by choice. Poverty is connected with circumstances that arise due to political and economical polices that are put into place by a capitalist government. If people in poverty were denied the civil right of becoming literate they would not be able to question political and economic decisions that fail to bring them out of poverty. Being denied this right would allow society to continue to make decisions that are directed toward political gain and not toward the betterment of the people. If things remained as the status quo, explanations for decisions made toward society and the economy would be null and void, because an education was denied, thus deterring the right questions to be asked about these decisions.

A statement found in an article by UNESCO states "Policies, good or bad, are all decided by people who are quite literate. What we need to explain is why some literate ruling groups make consistently bad political and economic decisions" (UNESCO, 2010). These questions cannot be asked if you are lacking the education to read and understand

the political and economic policies.

Whether you believe it or not, economic policies effect the decisions that people make regarding going to school. Individuals are faced with deciding whether to bring in an income so they can feed their family or stay in a classroom. These types of decisions are a reality for families that live in poverty, causing them to remain illiterate. "Poverty breeds illiteracy by forcing children to drop out of school to work, and these illiterate people are forced to stay on the lowest levels of the work force and thus remain in poverty" (Adiseshiah , 1990, p. 7).

I can't say this enough, being literate is a basic civil right. Citizens need a way to survive and take care of their families. They should not be left without the knowledge and understanding of basic reading and writing skills. "Literacy is a human right; it is also key to achieving many development goals, and facilitates further learning" (Oxenham, p. 9).

Not providing an opportunity for an education to individuals to improve their lives in order to contribute to society is inhumane. "Education argues Gomez, is the one real thing in which constitutional guarantee of equal opportunity has not been adequate to promote and protect the social equity promised by U.S. democracy" (Greene, 2008, p.3)

Literacy as a right has been a topic of discussion for over 30 decades but statistics do not seem to reflect the challenges and attempts to find ways to increase it. Statistics are reflecting a heightened growth in illiteracy. "In the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy states; 3 million adults have limited reading and writing skills".

Prior to the 21st century the right to be literate was not viewed as a human right but as a right for White people of wealth and status. Until the late 21st century is when literacy was mentioned as a human right. "In 1975 a literacy symposium was arranged by UNESCO

were Persepolis Declaration, identified literacy as a human right, "Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right" (Oxenham, p 24).

## Is Literacy an Obligation?

I believe that literacy is a right of the people and an obligation of society to create ways to educate its citizens. The government has an obligation to the people that it serves to implement ways to provide an education for all. The Declaration of Independence states that, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness". Although at the time that this was written slavery was a part of society, and did not recognize Blacks as men or human beings actually made this statement null and void in the context of equality. The statement still remained in the Declaration of Independence after slavery was abolished.

When I read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, my interpretation of what these two documents are conveying is; society has a constitutional right and obligation to ensure citizens are provided with fundamental rights which would encompass creating ways to ensure a basic education.

Article 1 of The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states: "essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning" (art. 1).

In order for positive measures to occur citizens require the basic educational skills that

will empower them to seek the knowledge and skills that are needed to make life, liberty and happiness attainable. The feeling of empowerment that is created through the use of positive measures would also increase healthcare literacy and possibly decrease crime and violence within low-income communities. "Education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities" (Singh, 2010).

#### Conclusion

Citizens have a right to literacy and society has an obligation to find legitimate ways to implement programs to ensure that citizens are given the opportunity to learn basic literacy skills. In order for our society to move forward education has to become a priority for all citizens. Illiteracy continues to increase due to the economy and the educational systems methods of assessment used to identify student progress.

The future of our country is dependent on the educational level of our children. In order for our children to value an education and begin to stop the cycle of illiteracy, adults need to lead them to this understanding by example. If parents or adults continue to model these values, generations of literate children will increase and the poverty level will decrease.

In the Sticht (2010), article regarding multiple cycle levels of education, he expressed how important intergenerational educational successes of the parents affect their children and that in order to improve literacy levels amongst generations the policies should not focus on individual life cycles of the child or adult, but focus on implementing a policy that would engage multiple life cycles" (Sticht, 2010, p. 45). But it does not end there. Government has an obligation to review and revamp polices, that place emphasis on education that will lead to higher paying jobs and not require recipients to accept low paying jobs so that they can get off assistance. Poverty

will not decrease by dangling a dried up carrot at it. Society's obligation is to ensure that citizens understand that achieving an education increases knowledge and power that will create a voice, skills and higher paying jobs that can implement changes that will help to increase literacy in society.

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